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Mexico

Poultry and Products

Update on Listeria Testing Procedures

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Report Highlights:

This report updates MX2168 with some of the recent changes to the Secretariat of Agriculture's Listeria testing procedure. The Secretariat of Agriculture indicates that it is in the process of re-writing its Listeria testing procedure and will consult with the Food Safety Inspection Service before implementing the revised procedure.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
Mexico [MX1], MX

Changes to Listeria Testing Procedures

Mexico's Secretariat of Agriculture (SAGARPA) initiated a sampling and testing program for Listeria in imported cooked poultry meat in early December. SAGARPA officials indicate that they are in the process of revising their testing procedures, and these revisions will be published "soon." SAGARPA officials have also indicated that they intend to solicit comments from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) before finalizing the revised procedure. In the interim, SAGARPA has recently modified and clarified some of the terms and procedures that apply to the testing of imported poultry meat for Listeria.

1. SAGARPA has reduced its sampling rate from every lot to every container.
2. SAGARPA has defined "ready for human consumption" as poultry products subject to testing to diagnose listeria that "...are to be consumed without the need for additional cooking procedures. This category includes cooked, precooked and smoked products, among others."
3. SAGARPA's initial instructions on Listeria indicated that in the event of a positive finding in a shipment under "test and hold" status, the shipment would be rejected. However, during recent animal health meetings in Mexico, officials stated that there are now three possible actions: rejection of the shipment, a request to FSIS to de-list the plant, and a request to inspect the affected plant in the United States. Comment: We know of no written instructions outlining these alternate actions and suspect that they may be a preview of the revised Listeria procedures.

Does Mexico Have a Domestic Listeria Testing Program?

In response to a request about the status of Mexico's national Listeria program, SAGARPA officials informed the Office of Agricultural Affairs that they have broad authority to verify that products of animal origin are of optimum sanitary quality. That authority is provided for in articles 1°, 2°, 3° and 28° of the Federal Health Law and Articles 3 Part III, 32,33,35,49 Parts I, II, III, IV, and 50 of the SAGARPA's Internal Regulations published July 10, 2001 in the Diario Oficial (Federal Register).

SAGARPA does not appear to have a specific regulation for the testing of domestically produced meats for the presence Listeria. However, SAGARPA officials indicate that they have instructed federally inspected processing plants to implement their own Listeria testing procedures. Presumably, SAGARPA inspectors would verify the presence of these programs as appropriate. However, it does not appear that SAGARPA officials subject domestic meat to the same level of sampling and testing that they apply to imported meat. The Secretariat of Health established specific procedures for testing for the presence of Listeria in NOM-143-SSA1-1995 dated November 19, 1997.

Revised Listeria Testing Procedure

For the sake of convenience, we are providing the text of our initial Listeria report MX 2168 below. The text has been modified to incorporate subsequent modifications to the Listeria testing procedure as we understand them.

Begin Modified Text of MX2168

On November 27, 2002, Mexico's Secretariat of Agriculture (SAGARPA) informed the Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) via letter that it was going to implement a testing program

for listeria in response to recent detections of listeria in the United States. The letter defined the products to be tested as “hamburgers, nuggets, cold cuts, or any other prepared chicken and turkey product ready for human consumption.” Comment: The Office of Agricultural Affairs (OAA) understands SAGARPA’s use of the word “hamburger” to mean chicken and/or turkey burgers in this case.

The FSIS letter contained few details about the testing procedure, however, the OAA has obtained copies of the instructions sent to SAGARPA border inspectors on November 29 and December 5, which provide additional details about the testing procedure. A summary follows:

1. Inspectors should verify that imported products comply with all sanitary requirements.
2. Inspectors will take a 250 gram sample per container in accordance with SAGARPA procedures.
3. Importation will be authorized immediately for products that comply with sanitary requirements and have been sampled for listeria testing.
4. Samples will be sent to one of four laboratories.
5. In the event of a positive test result, the Secretariat of Health will be notified. The health law is general, however, it appears that the Secretariat would have several options, such as recall, destruction, or the imposition of penalties, depending on the amount and location of the affected product. Additionally, the next shipment from the U.S. plant in which the positive sample originated will be held at each border crossing point for up to 30 days, pending the results of the listeria test. If the test results are negative, shipments will be permitted to enter on a port-by-port basis. If positive, SAGARPA officials have indicated that they will either reject the shipment, request that the affected plant be de-listed by FSIS, or re-inspect the plant in the United States. Thus far, only the first option has been provided in writing, option two and three have only been communicated verbally.
6. All positive results will be posted at authorized ports of entry.
7. All costs associated with the testing are the responsibility of the importer.

It is not clear how long this procedure will be in place. The SAGARPA letter to FSIS states that “Once the risk is lowered in sufficient degree, we will return to the normal inspection procedures.” This implies that the testing procedure may be temporary, however, we recommend that exporters prepare for this procedure to be in place indefinitely. Additionally, we recommend that exporters work closely with their importers to verify and clarify the procedures outlined above.

End Text of MX2168

Disclaimer: In the event of a discrepancy or discrepancies in the English translation of the SAGARPA letter, the original SAGARPA letter shall prevail.